



Thriving, Punchy, and... Innocuous

"United States culture has transformed Christ, as well as all other religions found within these shores. In every aspect of the religious life, American faith has met American culture—and American culture has triumphed" (Alan Wolfe, The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith [Free Press, 2003]).

"America looks like two tribes, one religious and one secular. But the really distinctive feature of American religion is the area in the middle. Most Americans do not become members of a church to sign up for a crusade or sit in judgment of sinners...their religion is mild" (Survey: America, "Therapy of the Masses," The Economist, 6 November 2003).

In a post-election NPR interview, Terry Gross asked David Frum of the American Enterprise Institute whether the rise of evangelical Christian influence through the White House troubled him, a practicing Jew. His response was poignant. "It really doesn't. I am impressed by the moderation of what is on the agenda of modern evangelicals. It doesn't strike me as a shocking demand." In other words, he considered the evangelical church easy to satisfy. Setting aside the fact that the "moral values vote" helped cement his institute's desired election result, Frum's astute conclusion about the relative innocuousness of the American church begs serious reflection. Despite our sprawling campuses, multimedia-powered worship, best-selling books, and thriving ministries, the world doesn't find us particularly compelling, let alone threatening. We are neither hot nor cold.

What's behind our tepid and incon-

sequential existence? Why do we ask of Washington little more than the protection of sexual norms and unborn fetuses? Is it because we lack the theological sophistication necessary to educe the social dimensions of morality? Is biblical ignorance undermining our ability to ethically address racism, poverty, and war? Have a handful of high-powered evangelicals managed to rally three-fourths of the church around their well-honed pronouncement of "non-negotiables"? Or has the vote-seeking marketing prowess of political strategists deftly repackaged the gospel to our liking?

While I believe all these factors play a role, I would argue that the church's current anemia cannot be explained solely by scriptural ignorance or unquestioning deference to moralistic punditry. Doing so dangerously discounts our propensity to choose what we want to hear and reject. The Scriptures assert that ignorance and passivity are willful: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Luke 8:8); "Do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:8); "We played the flute for you, and you didn't dance; we sang a dirge, you didn't cry" (Matt. 11:17). What drives our selective hearing? Might there be idols we seek to hide and protect?

We usually expose our captivity to idols when our defenses flare up. Last year, with growing concern about our government's foreign and domestic policies, our pastoral staff produced a series of articles to exegete the current political milieu through a gospel lens. Our hope was not only to stimulate gospel reflection among our own parishioners but also to promote dialogue among brothers and sisters at large. While our electoral bias was not obscured, our explicit goal was to get Christians to think, not to tell them how to vote.

The at-large reactions were instructive: "I can't believe you're producing this propaganda!"; "Don't you see how divisive and deceptive you are being?"; "It's obvious that you base your judgments on debate per-

formances and polls rather than issues and character"; "How can you arrogantly criticize someone just because they seem less articulate than you?"; "You like to appear 'thoughtful' when in fact you're simply listening to the media"; "Since when have we taken an anti-war and anti-White House perspective? You've bought into a bunch of lies!"

What was most striking was not the ensuing fount of opposing perspective, but rather the defensive intensity that accompanied it. And while there is nothing particularly unchristian about being punchy, the reactions fired were rarely based on anything remotely biblical or theological. Essentially, we were written off before any meaningful dialogue could start. In other words, in our experience, political dialogue among Christians simply parrots the prevailing culture war. We vilify the same enemies, whether liberals, conservatives, big government, big business, terrorists, CEOs, academic elitists, politicians, talk show hosts, movie producers, etc. And while God freely judges all human agency, it appears that we've forgotten that our fundamental battle is "not against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities." We thrash about self-righteously while the world watches in amusement or disdain.

For the sake of the church's witness, I believe it is time for us to interrogate the secular nature of our political discourse. What's behind our doctrinaire, knee-jerk responses? Why do our defenses go up when biblical inquiry questions our personal politics? What exactly is it that we are so anxious to defend? Might it be that the real Enemy resides a lot closer to home than we care to admit? ■

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